

# Beer, Vomit, Blood, and Poetry

## *Egils saga*, Chapters 44–45

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Chapters 44 and 45 of *Egils saga*<sup>1</sup> concern the prequel of what Sigurður Nordal has described as one of the most understated love stories in the history of Western literature.<sup>2</sup> Egil's charismatic brother Thorolf has gone off to marry Asgerd, the young, beautiful, and intelligent girl who was fostered and raised in Egil's and Thorolf's home, but who was not related to them. The reader of the saga who is reading or listening to the saga for the first time can have no way of knowing what Egil feels for Asgerd. All the reader can know is that Egil became uncharacteristically sick just before his brother's wedding, that later after Thorolf's death in battle, Egil seeks Asgerd's hand in marriage with great determination, and that Egil becomes pitifully depressed when it appears that Asgerd has refused his suit.

The point of anticipating Egil's later wooing of Asgerd, however, is that Egil's swift recovery after his brother's departure and his emotional volatility during the adventures that ensue are well motivated, although only in retrospect. Egil is on the rebound, and as his friends might say, if saga men could use twenty-first-century idioms, he is in a funny mood. Thus when he encounters a bad and ultimately

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1. All quotations from *Egils saga* are from the edition of Bjarni Einarsson (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003) by page number. I have also consulted the editions of Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk fornrit 2* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), and Finnur Jónsson (Halle: Niemeyer, 1924). Translations of Old Norse-Icelandic are my own, but I have, of course, consulted previous translations and the comments of their various editors.

2. Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, trans. Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1990), 120.

murderous host, and the poisonous hostility of Queen Gunnhild, Egil responds with a combination of poetry, wit, and violence, which enables him to defy the king of Norway and his queen, respond to his host with memorable and elegant poetry, eventually take blood vengeance, and yet live to tell the tale.

The story, as it unfolds, seems almost random and anecdotal. Egil has recovered from his illness after the departure of his brother, and since he is bored and has nothing to do he joins Ólvir, one the stewards of the household, on a trip to collect rents. There is nothing planned or deliberate about this trip, and if Ólvir had been a more senior member of the household of his master Thorir Hroaldson, he would have presumably been included in the marriage feast. The trip Egil sets out on is thus a routine, rather low-level business trip, and the only reason Egil goes on this journey is that he has absolutely nothing to do at home. The beginning of the trip is again mundane enough. They run into bad weather, and although they make reasonable progress, they are tired, wet, and exhausted when they stop for the day and seek shelter from Bard, who is the supervisor of one of the king's estates. Here again, the story as it unfolds involves pure chance. If the weather had been better, they would presumably have gone farther; if the weather had been worse, they would not have gotten as far as they did. Their arrival at the estate Bard managed was a matter of pure luck; they did not plan to stay with Bard, and he could have had no way of knowing that they might arrive and need hospitality. And while Bard will, in the course of the evening, be commemorated in memorable and intricate verse as a bad host, his response to his unexpected guests is, it might seem, at least reasonably generous. He provides them with lodging and a good fire to warm them. And he also provides them with at least adequate provisions although they only have *skyr* and *afr*—"yogurt" and "buttermilk" to drink. It is difficult for a modern reader to gauge how grievous a breach of hospitality Bard's failure to provide alcoholic beverages was. From a common-sense point of view it is hard not to have some sympathy for Bard. He must have known that the king and his retinue were in the area and might arrive soon, as indeed they did. Fourteen thirsty sailors can drink a great deal of beer or ale,<sup>3</sup> and one would hardly

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3. The terms "beer" and "ale" are to some degree ambiguous in modern usage and it

want to run out of ale when hosting King Eirik Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhild. Keeping the provisions for the king's feast set aside was not a generous gesture, but it would hardly seem a mortal offense, and it is noteworthy that only Egil comments on the situation. But Bard had twice insisted that he did not have adequate provisions to provide for his unexpected guests, and so as the story unfolds and as the king arrives and tells Bard that he wants to share the royal feast with Qlvir and his men, Bard's stinginess is publicly exposed. Bard is at fault and he is shamed by the generosity of his master the king. It could be argued that Bard then overcompensates, as it were, and having formerly been a stingy host, he now insists on forcing his tired guests, who have already drunk a great deal of buttermilk and skyr, to drink massive amounts of ale. There is no suggestion that Qlvir or any other members of his party were deeply angered by Bard's behavior—they take Bard's churlishness in stride and accept the hospitality that is offered them. Egil, however, is more sensitive. His brother Thorolf, who has surpassed Egil in a variety of ways, is celebrating a marriage feast and marrying the girl whom Egil desires, and for Egil to have to drink ale on top of buttermilk is both annoying in itself and must remind Egil of the magnificent feast which he is missing, and more importantly of the occasion of that feast.

There is no direct way Egil can respond to Bard's churlishness; he has belatedly been invited to join the king's feast and the king has treated Qlvir and his companions honorably. It is saga convention, however, that poetry is often the mode that allows a speaker to address the emotional realities of a saga situation directly—in part because the intricate discourse of skaldic poetry is so indirect. So when Bard compounds his churlishness by forcing beer on the travelers whom he has already encouraged to drink buttermilk, Egil responds with a stanza that directly addresses Bard's behavior.

Sögðuð sverri flagða  
sumbleklu þér, kumbla,  
því tel ek, brjótr, þar er blétuð,

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is not clear exactly whether what Egil and his friends were consuming was ale or beer; I use the term ale for convenience. The terms "ale," "beer," "wine," and "mead" were all used as "Grundwörter" in kennings for poetry. See Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn: K. Schroeder, 1921), 427–30.



bragðvísan þik, dísir.  
 Leynduð alls til illa  
 ókunna þér runna,  
 illt hafið bragð of brugðit,  
 Bárðr, hugar fári. (58–59, v. 8)

You told the enemy of the giantesses [the man]  
 [there was] lack of beer for you  
 There where you sacrificed to the disir,  
 you desecrator of graves!  
 Therefore I reckon you cunning;  
 You concealed entirely  
 evil enmity of thought  
 to bushes [trees / men]  
 unknown to you.  
 Barðr, you played an evil trick.

Egil's insulting verse was concerned with Bard, but Bard takes advantage of his position as a trusted favorite of the king and queen and goes to queen Gunnhild to complain that Egil is mocking them all by drinking everything which is given him and claiming that he is still thirsty. Ólvir and most of his company are having trouble drinking beer on top of the skyr and buttermilk Bard gave them earlier in the evening, but Egil does not seem to be affected, so there is some justice to Bard's complaint. But Egil is mocking Bard, not the king or the queen, and so there is no reason for either of them to become involved.

Gunnhild, however, in keeping with her reputation as a sorceress and very dangerous opponent, accepts Bard's account of his quarrel with Egil and prepares a poisoned drink to give to this insolent guest. Egil responds by carving runes stained with blood on the drinking horn and reciting a verse that has strong affinities with the poetic charms. The drinking horn immediately bursts—thus proving the malign intentions of Bard and demonstrating Egil's poetic and magical abilities. This episode presents Egil in a markedly Odinic light—carving runes, performing magic, and reciting poetry—but some of the most striking parallels to Egil's magic feat are hagiographic. According to Christian legend, Benedict, the founder of the

Benedictine order, warded off poison drink with the sign of the Cross, just as Egil did with runes.<sup>4</sup> At any rate the evening, pleasant as it has been, is drawing to a close, and Egil and Qlvir, who is about to pass out, decide to head back to their lodgings. Bard comes to the doorway, asking Qlvir to drink one more toast. Egil takes the horn and throws it down, makes one more verse, and stabs and kills Bard with the sword he was holding. Bard collapses, bleeding and dying, and Qlvir vomits and passes out while Egil escapes, first to his lodging where he gets his weapons, and then eventually to another island from which he eventually escapes after further adventures.

This narrative strikes one immediately as a swash-buckling (i.e., shield-pounding) Viking adventure story. Neither Egil nor Bard is, technically speaking, a Viking, although Egil did go viking later in his career, but the account of drunken violence at a “Viking” feast accords well with what we would expect at such an occasion. Heavy drinking, vomiting, poison, and finally a killing seem appropriate. One problem with this view of these chapters in *Egils saga* is that *Egils saga* itself is a deeply ironic and to some extent comic work. If this account of Viking adventure seems like a comic-book version of such adventure, it is important to remember that we are not reading a contemporary account of life in the Viking Age, but a narrative by an author who lived approximately two hundred and fifty years later and whose view of tenth-century Icelanders and Norwegians was to some degree detached and ironic. Even if we accept *Egils saga* as historically true in broad outline (and I am myself sympathetic to this position), the details of what unfolded at a feast two hundred and fifty years before the saga was written are unlikely to have been preserved in oral tradition without elaboration and modification. If we see these chapters as a fictional construct (although perhaps based on real events), then we can perhaps read them and understand them as allusive and symbolic narrative.

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4. Gregory the Great, *Dialogorum libri iv*, II, 4; for a convenient edition with good notes see *Grégoire le Grand, Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert Vogüé, trans. Paul Antin, 3 vols., Sources chrétiennes 251, 260, 265 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1978–80), 2:143. This parallel was first noted by Régis Boyer, “The Influence of Pope Gregory’s Dialogues on Old Icelandic Literature,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference: University of Edinburgh 1971*, ed. Peter Foote et al. (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 1–27. In his notes on this episode in the *Dialogi*, Vogüé gives references to classical and Christian analogues.

In these chapters the young Egil Skallagrimsson emerges, for the first time, as an adult poet, Odinic figure, and opponent of royal authority in Norway. The relationship between Egil and Eirik and Gunnhild, and between Egil's family and the Norwegian royal family, is one of the central themes of the saga, and these chapters are important in the larger structure of the saga for that reason alone. But this is a richly detailed narrative, and it is appropriate to think about the saga author's emphases and about the possible implications of these details.

This is a story about beer (or ale—there is some question about the exact nature of the alcoholic drink involved), vomit, blood, and poetry, and these apparently diverse items in my list are in fact associated in Old Norse Icelandic mythology in that the divine being Kvasir is created from the spittle of the Æsir and the Vanir, and then killed for his blood, which is mixed with honey and made into mead. The mead comes into the possession of the giant Suttung, who guards it jealously until it is stolen by Odin (after various adventures), who drinks the mead and then flies back to Asgard in the shape of an eagle, where he vomits the mead into a cauldron. This mead is the inspiration of poets, and various kennings defining poetry as a kind of drink or liquid are quite common. Poetry is thus defined as the mead of Odin, or the blood of Kvasir, or other similar locutions.

Roberta Frank has questioned the authenticity of some portions of these myths.<sup>5</sup> I am more impressed by the evidence for the archaism of the myth or, to be more precise, this complex of myths than Professor Frank is, but even Professor Frank would grant that the equation of poetry and intoxicating drink is a genuinely old poetic figure in this tradition. In any case one can always make the somewhat reductive argument that *Egils saga* shows close stylistic and conceptual affinities with Snorri Sturluson's known work, and a number of scholars (including Torfi H. Tulinius, fellow contributor to this volume) have proposed that Snorri was in fact the author of *Egils saga*. Thus, whether the myth of Kvasir in all its baroque complexity was genuinely old or

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5. Roberta Frank, "Snorri and the Mead of Poetry," in *Speculum Norroenum: Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 155–70. One argument for the archaism of the complex of myths involving Kvasir is that much of this material (the origin of Kvasir and the service of Odin to Baugi, etc.) does not serve as the basis for kennings, so it is hard to see why Snorri would or could make it up out of whole cloth.



not, the myth would have been known and presumably accepted by Snorri himself or the member of his circle or admirer of his work who wrote *Egils saga* as we have it.

At any rate, accepting for the moment the claim that the various myths about Kvasir are genuinely archaic, one immediate point to make about this traditional material is the way in which “poetry” and “poetic inspiration,” two different but clearly related concepts, are associated with a wide variety of bodily fluids. Kvasir himself is created from the mixing of bodily fluids, the saliva of the various Æsir and Vanir. The gods then reshape these fluids into a being who epitomizes wisdom. Kvasir is soon killed, and his blood, mixed with honey, is made into mead. The curiously matter-of-fact way in which this killing is narrated—the dwarves who kill Kvasir are never punished for their crime and the gods accept their claim that Kvasir burst because of being too wise without question and apparently without comment—suggests that this step in the transformation of Kvasir is not regarded as all that dramatic a change. For a being who was once a cauldron’s worth of mingled saliva to become a cauldron of mead is not apparently a wholly unexpected transformation. At this point, however, Kvasir has been identified with three kinds of fluid: saliva, blood, and mead. The next steps in the story involve other kinds of liquid. In order to obtain the mead, Odin seduces the giant’s daughter Gunnloðr and wins three drinks of mead by sleeping with her three times. The mead of poetry is thus exchanged for the gift of semen, and the story of Odin bringing the mead to Asgard involves two further forms of human fluid: vomit and excretion. Odin vomits the mead he has stolen into a vat the other gods have prepared for him, and since he is closely pursued by a giant in the form of a bird, he excretes some of the mead behind, which is henceforth known as the “skáldfífla hlutr” or poetic mead of foolish poets. Since as a matter of biological fact birds excrete liquid and solid waste together, one does not have to identify the exact nature of Odin’s excreted mead.

The only human fluid that is omitted from this list is sweat. For the sake of completeness I am tempted to point out that since Odin serves Baugi in the place of nine agricultural workers for a summer season, ample sweat is implicit in this exchange. But Snorri’s text does not mention sweat, and it is probably best not to press this interpretation. At any rate, these stories involve various kinds of human liquid that

are transformed or exchanged to produce the mead of poetry. Thus in terms of these myths there is a sense in which poetry is blood and poetry is vomit, and the mead or intoxicating drink of poetry is the fundamental metaphoric equation of this tradition.

In the story of Egil's encounter with Bard the narrative is essentially realistic, but this story is the story of Egil's first appearance as an adult poet, and beer, vomit, blood, and poetry are all emphasized, and the mixing and blending of these various intellectual and material substances are striking. In the conclusion of Egil's encounter with Bard, Bard follows his guests to the door and tries to force one final horn of ale on his drunken and reluctant guests. Egil takes the horn, recites one last stanza of poetry, and throws the horn and the beer it contains on the floor. He then stabs Bard, killing him immediately, and the blood pours out of the wound. At this point, Qlvir passes out, vomits, and falls to the floor. Qlvir's name may possibly derive etymologically from the phrase "to consecrate ale"—an etymology which seems relevant in this context,<sup>6</sup> and in any case Egil plays on the similarity of "ql" and "Qlvir" in the verse he recites before he kills Bard. At any rate, at this juncture in the narrative, Egil runs away. When the king's men go out to the entrance of the hall Bard and Qlvir are so completely covered with blood and vomit that the men think they have killed each other. It takes a while to realize that while Bard is truly dead and the blood all his, Qlvir is simply passed out, lying on the floor covered with blood and vomit and ale. The floor is covered with ale, blood, and vomit and the moment when these substances were mixed was commemorated with poetry. I would argue that this scene thus evokes and suggests the complex of myths about Kvasir; that just as we recognize Odinic allusion or echoes of the myth of Ragnarøk in various sagas, we should similarly be aware of mythic allusion to the stories about Kvasir in this scene.

Up to this point my argument has been based upon close reading of the relevant chapters of *Egils saga* and underscoring the potential relevance of various stories about Kvasir. But it must also be admitted that this saga narrative is essentially realistic. People do drink too

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6. See Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1977), s.v. "Qlvir." De Vries says the etymology is disputed but mentions the phrase "alu vígja" as potentially relevant.



much at feasts and parties, particularly when pressured by friends or an importunate host. And all one has to do is glance at a police blotter in any town or city in either Scandinavia or the English-speaking world to see countless examples of how heavy drinking leads to violence that prudent and sober men would have avoided. My argument presumes—a skeptical critic might say—that the audience of *Egils saga* would be so steeped in Old Norse-Icelandic myth as to read realistic narrative in terms of myth. How can I be sure, or at least reasonably sure, that even the ideal reader (the literary critic's own mythical construct) would not have read this perfectly realistic and reasonable story as simply a realistic and reasonable story without the elaborate structure of mythological allusion I have suggested? I do not think this is a trivial objection—my own response to much “mythological” criticism of the *Íslendingasögur* is often skeptical. I would like the sagas (or at least some of the sagas) to be richly allusive in their use of myth. But how can one simultaneously avoid modern critical over-reading and still understand the more subtle instances of mythic allusion and patterning in the sagas?

The question is a difficult one, but in this instance I have an answer for my imagined critic. The last verse Egil speaks before he kills Bard, the poetry that prefaces the mingling of blood, vomit, and ale that concludes this scene, is as follows:

Qlvar mik, því at Qlvi  
 ql gervir nú fqlvan;  
 atgeira læt ek ýrar  
 ýring of grøn skýra;  
 qllungis kannt illa,  
 oddskýs, fyr þér nýsa,  
 rigna getr at regni,  
 regnbjóðr, Hárs þegna.<sup>7</sup> (60, v. 10)

I am getting drunk [literally: “It ales me”]  
 because ale now makes Qlvir pale.

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7. Bjarni Einarsson (60n) suggests that a disyllabic form of the Odinic name Hárs, i.e., Háars would be metrically preferable. Sigurður Nordal and Finnur Jónsson also previously supported this emendation.

I cause the liquid of the spears of the auroch  
 [beer from the drinking horn]  
 to flow over [my] mustache  
 You [Bard] can peer around very badly  
 [you, Bard, are not careful]  
 point-cloud's rain-offer-er  
 [he who offers the rain of battle / warrior]  
 With the rain of the thegns of the high one,  
 It begins to rain.

In the last four lines of the poem, Egil is telling Bard that he (Bard) is not being careful, which is an extreme understatement. Egil is about to kill him, and adapting the intricate and allusive language of the skaldic tradition, Egil is saying that he is reciting poetry as he concludes the stanza. But he does not say directly that he is reciting poetry—he uses a mythological kenning for poetry; he speaks of poetry as the “regn Hárs þegna,” the rain of the thegns of the high one. The high one is Odin; the thegns of the high one are poets, and so the rain of the thegns of the high one is poetry. But how and why can we think of poetry as rain? The answer involves myth. When Odin in the shape of a creature of the air, an eagle, vomited mead into the cauldron which the gods had set out for him, liquid fell from the air to the earth, so poetry can be described as the rain of the High one, i.e., Odin.

This is the interpretation of these verses as accepted by all editors and commentators, but to my knowledge no one has commented on how the kenning and the conclusion of this verse relate to the action of the saga. As Egil speaks the last words of the stanza, “rigna getr at regni, regnbjóðr, Hávars þegna” (oh man who offers rain, it begins to rain with the rain of the thegns of the high one), he throws down the horn of beer and thrusts his sword through Bard’s stomach while Ólvir collapses, his vomit mixing with Bard’s blood and the beer on the floor. In order to understand the literal meaning of the figurative language of the poem, one has to know the genealogy, as it were, of the mead of poetry. If for some reason one has forgotten what ale, blood, vomit, and poetry have to do with each other, the process of unraveling the kennings of the poem forces one to review the myths of Kvasir. These mythic associations are then literalized on the floor of King Eirík’s hall.

The broad claim that the sagas of the Icelanders sometimes allude to Old Norse-Icelandic myth has been made before for a variety of

sagas, and some of the parallels that have been suggested seem to me quite plausible.<sup>8</sup> There has been less discussion of the literary implications of such allusion, but it occurs to me that mythic allusion in the *Íslendingasögur* is rather similar to typology in hagiographic narrative. Egil is a drunken, violent, insolent young man in these chapters, but he is also a character who “bears the person” (to adapt the language of exegesis) of someone other than himself.<sup>9</sup> Just as Andreas in the Old English *Andreas* brings a flood upon the wicked Meremedonians, those archetypal bad hosts, which is both a mighty sign in itself, and which evokes the patristic and early medieval understanding of baptism as a flood that destroys and yet saves,<sup>10</sup> so Egil’s adventures in Eirik’s hall echo and suggest myths about the origin and dissemination of poetic inspiration and poetry itself, the product of that inspiration.

It is a critical commonplace that Egil Skallagrimsson, the protagonist of *Egils saga*, is a figure embodying extraordinary contrasts, brutal yet sensitive, violent when provoked, but a good friend and a good neighbor otherwise, drunken and insolent on occasion, but at the same time genuinely wise in both a political sense and in his knowledge of both poetic craft and runes. On first reading, this account of Egil’s adventures at Eirik’s court seems like a combination of adventure story and gross comedy, and of course it is. But the author of *Egils saga*, the man or woman who gave final shape to the text we have, tells the story of Egil’s mad youthful adventures in Norway in a way that suggests that poetry and poetic madness (furor, or to use the Old Norse-Icelandic term, “óðr”) is both a gift and a potentially dangerous blessing. The mead of poetry is an intoxicating drink, and those who drink it are often more than a little mad. As Egil begins his adult career as a poet and a warrior he reenacts, as it were, the history of poetry itself, and if his adventures seem grossly comic and violent, this saga is also the story of a man frustrated in love and asking nothing more than courtesy and justice. This odd

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8. For a useful introduction and survey of this large topic see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994–1998), and Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003).

9. See further Jeffrey Turco, “Loki, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaics,” in this volume.

10. See Thomas D. Hill, “Figural Narrative in *Andreas*: The Conversion of the Meremedonians,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969): 261–73, for documentation.



blend of sensitivity and violence is in effect both a comment upon and a reiteration of the myth of Kvasir, the divine wisdom, who was sacrificed and yet lives; who is the embodiment of the highest divine wisdom, and yet realized in grossly physical liquid form. Egil is both sublime and gross—to some extent he *is* poetry—and if we are offended by his behavior, we must remember that both poetic and real intoxication can be a blessing and a curse at the same time.

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